

***Amherst's
Little Red Schoolhouse
A Historic Treasure***



by

The Little Red Schoolhouse Preservation Committee

December 2011

Brief History of the Little Red Schoolhouse

I. The creation of the Little Red Schoolhouse:

In July 1936, a petition was drafted to Dr. Stanley King, President of Amherst College, advocating for a permanent building to serve as preschool. (See petition on the following page.) Originally proposed as a school for Amherst Faculty, the Little Red Schoolhouse was eventually built for the Amherst College faculty children and the community at large and has served as an affordable, quality preschool for the past 75 years. It is estimated that the Little Red Schoolhouse has served approximately 1700 preschoolers since it was founded. It is believed to be the oldest preschool in Amherst.

II. The Architects:

The Little Red Schoolhouse building was designed in 1937 by the esteemed American architectural firm McKim, Mead and White. James Kellum Smith, last partner to McKim, Mead and White and Amherst College graduate from 1915, designed the schoolhouse. Smith also designed the American Museum of Natural History, the Mead Art Building, and the Amherst College War Memorial overlooking Memorial Field. Other buildings designed by McKim, Mead and White include Penn Station, the Boston Public Library and the Rhode Island Statehouse. The building was paid for by James Turner who graduated from Amherst College in 1880.

The sketch below, drawn by McKim, Mead & White on May 12, 1937, shows the North Elevation of the Proposed Little Red School.



1936 petition to Amherst College asking them to establish the pre-school

We, the undersigned, submit the following petition to Dr. Stanley King, President of Amherst College.

WHEREAS,

There has long been a need in Amherst for a nursery and primary school for the children of the Amherst Faculty, because the public school is overcrowded, the private school inadequate, and the Northampton Day School is inconvenient and expensive.

WHEREAS,

In the past, a number of attempts have been made to fill this need, but the schools have all been of a temporary make-shift character. In turn, they have closed down because of the impermanence of their quarters, through lack of organization, divided responsibility or for other reasons.

We propose to found a school which shall not fail, because it will be a permanent, dependable feature of Amherst Faculty life. According to our plans, it would be known as the Amherst Day School; it would be run by a committee of Faculty mothers, and a board of trustees composed of Faculty wives and Trustees of the College; and it would be housed in a permanent building. Although the emphasis would be laid on giving the children a sound basis for their education, there would be additional advantages offered over the local schools, such as regular medical supervision, more healthful surroundings, shorter school hours for the younger children in the primary grades, training in music, rhythms, and so on.

WHEREAS,

The present need being acute, we propose to start the school in temporary quarters, three or four rooms, as lavatory and a play-yard being required.

In order to start on a scale small enough to handle practicably and soundly, we would begin the school with only two classes, and from fifteen to twenty children, having not more than ten children in one class. The classes would be kindergarten and First Grade. This original First Grade group would be carried on through the Fourth or Fifth Grade and new classes taken in at the bottom, thus enlarging the school and staff of teachers gradually.

WHEREAS,

We have now two excellent teachers whose salaries can be paid out of tuition, and we do not ask for equipment, we must have help on the rent, heat, light and water.

THEREFORE,

We petition President King to bring this situation to the attention of the Trustees of Amherst College, and recommend that they secure and maintain temporary quarters for a school for the year 1936-37, with a view toward providing a permanent building as soon as possible.

July - 1936

III. The Construction of the Little Red Schoolhouse:

When former Amherst College President Stanley King spoke to alumnus James Turner (class of 1880) about his idea of creating the Amherst Day School, Mr. Turner agreed to fund the building of the school on two conditions: 1) that he would like his donation to remain anonymous; 2) and that he wanted to meet with the architects. Mr. Turner liked the architect's plan (which in reality was designed by the president's wife!), but "insisted that the building should be built of the best materials in the market without regard to any budget." The building proposed cost twice that of the original proposal. The president brought the proposal to the Board and received their approval.

Referring to the Little Red Schoolhouse in his 1952 publication, *The Consecrated Eminence: The Story of the Campus and Buildings of Amherst College*, former President King wrote, "No building on the Amherst campus is better built."

Upon the death of Mr. Turner the president contacted his surviving brother and sister to seek their approval to place a tablet beside the entrance of the school. Turner's brother and sister then gave the college a fund of \$20,000 with the provision that the income should be used by the College for the support of Little Red. (Upon their deaths they also each left a sizable amount from their individual estates to the general college endowment.) At the time the president's own daughter also gave \$3,000 for Little Red's endowment.



IV. Community Served:

James Turner's generous donation for the building of the Little Red Schoolhouse was with the express purpose of serving the children of the community. To date, the Little Red Schoolhouse is estimated to have educated approximately 1700 children. While some students are the children of Amherst College faculty members, the majority are from the community at large.

In a letter written in 1947, then Amherst College President Stanley King emphasized the important community service Amherst College was providing by offering the Little Red Schoolhouse program:

The fact that the school is open to the children of the town as well as to children of the Amherst faculty is recognition of the fundamental fact that the College is tax-exempt in the town and may wisely therefore make some return to the town. These facts I think should always be borne in mind in considering the Day School in its relation to the College.

In addition to serving children, the Little Red Schoolhouse has also functioned as an intern program of sorts for Amherst College with nine to ten Amherst College student volunteers working in the school every semester, often receiving payment through their work-study packages.



A newspaper article from the Gazette in 1943 entitled "*5th Anniversary of Day School Is Being Celebrated*" offers this description of the preschool program:

School hours for the nursery and kindergarten groups are from 8:45 to 12. Transportation is being taken care of by station wagon. A registered nurse checks each child daily and a physician thoroughly examines all pupils twice a year. A program which stresses sound habit formations, development of skills and cooperative living fills the morning. Block play, games, music and rhythm plays, carpentry, plastic arts and language experiences through participation in stories and verse are all part of the daily plan for the three, four and five year olds in attendance. The school is a community project operated on a non-profit making basis and administered by a committee of parents and board of trustees. In recognition of war conditions, tuition adjustments have been made in accordance with the number of children enrolled. Any child of pre-school age is eligible. Although the school was started by a group of Amherst college mothers interested in sound pre-school training, it has never been limited to college children and it is interesting to note that for the past two years the number drawn from the town has predominated. [See full newspaper article at the end of this booklet.]

V. Little Red Schoolhouse Through the Years:

A 1940 article from the Springfield Republican announced the Little Red Schoolhouse's celebration of its third year. An excerpt from this article states:

Mrs. Elizabeth Merrick ...is planning to have a fine program of music and rhythm for the whole school. She hopes also to have a few afternoon music groups which will be open to the children now enrolled [sic] as regular day school pupils...

The Little Red Schoolhouse photo below from 1968 shows music as a continued part of the curriculum.



In 1951, former Amherst College President Stanley King wrote in a document entitled *The Consecrated Eminence* that "The school has now been in operation in its new building for some fourteen years and continues to serve a real need of college and community with striking success."

The Little Red Schoolhouse today serves a diverse group of approximately 20 students aged 3.6-5 years old. Two to five of students each year are minorities. Two to five students are children of parents in one of the area's graduate programs. Most of the students attending the Little Red Schoolhouse are from the Town of Amherst. Partial tuition waivers are offered for students with financial need.

Little Red Schoolhouse Long Ago



Picnics long ago at the Little Red Schoolhouse



Little Red Schoolhouse in 1989



A Treasure of a Building- Nothing like it in Town!



A unique history in our community: the longest running preschool—more than 75 years!



Stunning Woodwork Interior



**Below: One of the two large open meeting spaces
Many possibilities for reuse of this building!**



Photos by Karen of k.reb photography.



**The Little Red Schoolhouse, still as solid as ever,
could serve our community for decades to come.**

